



## **Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years: Foundational Skills that Support Emergent Readers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

For all students, a high-quality early education is critical to ensuring their long-term academic success. Early learners need to understand why people read and write in order to be motivated to excel in their own literacy development. Through active engagement in the reading process, children learn ways to use their growing knowledge and skills flexibly and in combination with all domains of development. All children can develop a strong foundation for literacy and reading development when they are given opportunities to engage in purposeful, meaningful language and early print activities. Effective early literacy instruction provides preschool children with developmentally appropriate settings, materials, experiences, and social support that encourage early forms of reading and writing to flourish and develop into conventional literacy.

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### **Reading Development**

Reading requires the mastery, integration and application of numerous skills and knowledge. The National Reading Panel (NRP) of the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) issued a report that identified five areas that were critical for effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Reading or learning how to read is a combination of all these skills. They are interconnected and interdependent on one another, which makes it difficult to teach them in isolation.

Learning to read is a developmental process. Most children follow a similar pattern and sequence of reading behaviors as they learn how to read: from appreciation for and awareness of print to phonological and phonemic awareness to phonics and word recognition. Foundation skills are reading skills that students typically develop in the primary grades. The skills and behaviors that develop early serve as the base for later competence and proficiency. They are the building blocks that children learn to utilize to develop subsequent, higher-level skills to become proficient readers.



The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) conducted a synthesis of the scientific research on the development of early literacy skills in children ages zero to five. The panel's primary purpose was to synthesize research to contribute to decisions in educational policy and practice that affect early literacy development and to determine how teachers and families can support young children's language and literacy development (NELP, 2008). The NELP report identified six key predictors for reading and school success. These skills and abilities include alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters or numbers, rapid automatic naming of objects or colors, writing and phonological memory (NELP, 2008). Children who do not acquire mastery of these skills fall behind their classmates and generally are not reading and comprehending at grade level. NELP also concluded that there are an additional five early literacy skills that are moderately predictive of later literacy achievement: Concepts about print, print knowledge, reading readiness, oral language and visual processing. These five skills are usually more predictive of literacy achievement at the end of Kindergarten or beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> grade than of later reading development (NELP, 2008).

The Common Core Reading Standards: Foundational Skills (K-5) have also outlined a set of skills that children must master before they can become fluent readers and comprehend what they are reading. The foundational skills are focused on developing students' understanding and working knowledge of print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency (NGA and CCSSO, 2010). These skills are taught in a developmental sequence to support reading development. It is important to note that although the NRP identified comprehension and vocabulary as critical components of reading instruction, the Common Core Foundational Skills do not specifically identify these skills. Vocabulary and comprehension are the focus of the anchor standards and related grade-specific K-12 Common Core State Standards. Beginning in kindergarten and through the end-of-high school, comprehension and vocabulary are integrated across the Common Core strands: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language.

To support prekindergarten children in acquiring and mastering the foundational skills for reading development, effective instruction that is differentiated must be provided to meet their varied and individual needs. These guided experiences and instructional approaches must include Common Core Reading Standards Foundational Skills.

New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core

The preparation and foundation for reading success is formed before children enter school (National Reading Panel, 2000). Preschool education plays a critical and significant role in promoting literacy, preventing reading difficulties, and preparing young children for kindergarten.

In an effort to provide a clear, comprehensive, and consolidated resource for early childhood professionals, the New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards have been revised to fully encompass the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy at the Prekindergarten level. The revision process has resulted in one document, the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core (NYSED, 2011).

The New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core is organized into five broad developmental and interrelated domains: Approaches to



learning; physical development and health; social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; and cognition and knowledge of the world. These domains of child development represent the overarching areas of early childhood education that are essential for school and long-term success. The five distinct, but highly interrelated domains provide the structure for the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core.

Of the five developmental domains in the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core, Domain 4: Communication, language and literacy directly address how children understand, create, and communicate meaning. Domain 4 is divided into two sections. Part A – Approaches to communication encompasses motivation, background knowledge, viewing, representing, and vocabulary. In prekindergarten, children are expected to demonstrate that they are motivated to communicate, are building background knowledge, comprehend what they observe; express ideas using a variety of methods; and demonstrate a growing expressive vocabulary. Part B: English language arts and literacy is aligned with the New York State Common Core Learning Standards and includes reading standards for literature and informational texts; writing, speaking, listening and language standards. With prompting and support, prekindergarten children are expected to ask and answer question about detail(s) in a text, characters and major events in a story and retell familiar stories. They are also expected to learn new vocabulary words throughout their interactions with a wide variety of texts. With prompting and support, prekindergarten children are expected to compare and contrast stories with the same topic and make cultural connections to text and self.

Part B also includes the reading standards foundational skills. Children in prekindergarten are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the organization and basic features of print; demonstrate an emerging understanding of spoken words, syllables and sounds; demonstrate emergent phonics and word analysis skills; and display emergent reading behaviors with purpose and understanding. These expectations are consistent with the NELP’s findings on the key predictors for reading success.

Language, literacy and reading development in the prekindergarten years proceeds through several levels of foundational skills with skills and behaviors becoming more complex and more proficient as children get older. According to the NICHD (2000), foundation skills include three elements:

- Phonemic awareness — the awareness that spoken words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) and the ability to manipulate these sounds.
- Knowledge of high-frequency sight words — the most common words, which students should be able to read quickly and automatically.
- The ability to decode words — to translate a word from print to speech (for example, by using known sound-symbol correspondences to sound a word out and decipher it).

### **Prekindergarten Foundation Skills That Support Reading Development**

#### **Print Concepts**

Print awareness is an important part of knowing how to read and write. For pre- and emergent readers the pictures in books is an important element for developing oral



language and vocabulary during storybook reading and independent play. Although picture reading reflects a critical stage in literacy development, it is important for children to understand that print can be read and tells the story. In developing print awareness a child begins to understand what print looks like, how it works, and the fact that print carries meaning (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2009). Concepts of print refer to the ability of a child to understand and recognize the ways in which print functions for the purposes of reading, particularly with regard to books. Concepts about print include knowing where the front and the back of the book are located; knowing right side up from upside down; knowing that the print, not the picture, is what we read; knowing which direction we read in; and knowing the meaning of punctuation marks.

As children are learning about print concepts, they are building the foundation for early reading development. Knowledge of these concepts is essential to conventional reading and writing in English. Children with print awareness will begin to understand how written language is connected to oral language. Oral language skills are linked to the code-related skills that help word reading to develop and they also provide the foundation for the development of the more-advanced language skills needed for comprehension (Cain & Oakhill, 2007). Print awareness also supports children's ability to recognize words as components of both oral and written communication.

The concepts of word are predictive of how well children will be able to read in the early grades. Concept of word refers to the ability of a reader to match spoken words to written words while reading. While developing print awareness, young children will begin to understand that each word is separate, and that words are separated by a space within each sentence. Using strategies to build concept of word will also support children's developing awareness of the individual sounds within words. Developing concept of word precedes and may facilitate the development of phonological and phonemic awareness (Gately, 2004).

Concepts of print activities should help students understand the mechanics of a text, and may also emphasize the characteristics of a text, such as capital letters and punctuation (SEDL, 2008).

#### 1. Print Concepts (RF.PK.1)

Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print:

- a. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page-by-page.
- b. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.
- c. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.
- d. Recognize and name some upper /lowercase letters of the alphabet, especially those in own name.
- e. Recognize that letters are grouped to form words.
- f. Differentiate letters from numerals.

Table 1: Supporting print concepts in preschool



Classroom/Home Environment	Adult/Teacher Guidance	Instructional Example	Support for ELL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Label classroom/home materials with pictures and words.</li> <li>• Use environmental print to make books, games and activities (e.g., environmental print lotto and matching)</li> <li>• Connect functional print to class/home activities (e.g., daily routine and schedule)</li> <li>• Provide a Word wall, with appropriate pictures and words, for children to interact with</li> <li>• Appropriate technology (e.g., computer software, iPad, interactive whiteboards) that support print awareness and concepts of print</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide many opportunities for children to listen and actively participate in read-aloud and dialogic reading activities</li> <li>• Use predictable and patterned books</li> <li>• Model reading and writing behaviors</li> <li>• Explicitly discuss how a book works by pointing out the cover, back, title, authors, illustrators, and familiar words or names, during read-aloud sessions.</li> <li>• Discuss page arrangement and directionality of print with repeated readings and modeling with big books.</li> <li>• Take dictation from children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use read alouds and dialogic reading experiences to develop print concepts (e.g., “Show me the front of the book” “What does the author do?” “Show me where to begin to start reading on this page.”)</li> <li>• Engage children with materials that promote identification of the letters of the alphabet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Label classroom objects in home language of students</li> <li>• Physically model language to ELLs in classroom routines and instructional activities.</li> <li>• Provide non-English materials whenever possible in order to support a child’s first language while they learn to speak English.</li> <li>• Families should be encouraged to read and talk to their children in their native language.</li> </ul>

**Phonological Awareness**



Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize that words are made up of a variety of sound units. Phonological awareness is an umbrella term and encompasses a number of sound related skills necessary for reading development (Lane, 2007). As children develop phonological awareness they begin to learn that words can be segmented into syllables and each syllable begin with a sound (onset) and ends with another sound (rime). They also come to understand that words are made up of small sound units (phonemes) and that these units can be manipulated to form different words. By engaging in language and word play, children learn to recognize patterns among words and use this knowledge to read and build words.

### **Phonemic Awareness**

Reading is a complex and multifaceted process that involves learning a complicated and often confusing code of letters and sounds known as the alphabetic principle. Research has shown that some children struggle with this element of reading development because they have difficulty with phonemic awareness (NICHD, 2000; NELP, 2008; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013). Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to recognize, identify and manipulate phonemes in spoken words. Research has found that this element of reading is the single strongest indicator for a child’s success at learning to read (NICHD, 2000).

Phonemic awareness is grounded in oral language and serves as the foundation for reading development. Children who cannot hear and work with the phonemes of spoken words will have a difficult time learning how to relate these phonemes to graphemes (a letter or a number of letters that represent a phoneme in a word) when they see them in written words. This pre-phonics problem interferes with the learning of letter and sound connections.

Knowledge of the alphabet and phonological awareness are both strong predictors of later decoding and comprehension and teaching these in combination has a consistently positive impact on improving students’ later decoding and reading comprehension abilities (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013). Phonological awareness provides the foundation for phonics. Phonics, the understanding that sounds and print letters are connected, is the first step towards conventional reading.

## **2. Phonological Awareness (RF.PK.2)**

Demonstrate an emerging understanding of spoken words, syllables and sounds (phonemes):

- a. Engage in language play (e.g. alliterative language, rhyming, sound patterns).
- b. Recognize and match words that rhyme.
- c. Demonstrate awareness of relationship between sounds and letters.
- d. With support and prompting, isolate and pronounce the initial sounds in words.

Table 2: Supporting phonological awareness in preschool

Classroom/Home Environment	Adult/Teacher Directed	Instructional Examples	Support for ELL
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of books that emphasize rhyming and alliteration (e.g., Dr. Seuss, repetitive books with predictable phrases)</li> <li>• Songs, finger plays and nursery rhymes displayed on walls and flip charts.</li> <li>• Appropriate technology (e.g., computer software, iPad, Interactive whiteboards) that supports phonological and phonemic awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening games (follow the leader, Simon says)</li> <li>• Read books that contain rhyming words, emphasizing the rhyming words as you read</li> <li>• Clapping out or using blocks to separate words in a sentence</li> <li>• Clapping out syllables in children’s names</li> </ul> <p>Phonemic awareness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on first, medial and ending sounds in CVC words (e.g., /d/ /o/ /g/)</li> <li>• Segmenting, blending and manipulating phonemes (e.g., “What word do you get when you change the /h/ in hat to /c/?”)</li> <li>• Teach phonemes along with letters, not in isolation (e.g., “Peter, Paul, and Penelope all begin with the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide activities that follow a sequence of instruction progressing from easier to more difficult tasks and from larger to smaller units of spoken language.</li> <li>• Identifying and making rhymes (e.g., “Cat, hat, bat are words that rhyme.”)</li> <li>• Dividing sentences into words (e.g., While talking slowly and moving a block for each word, “The dog barks has three words.”)</li> <li>• Dividing words into syllables (e.g., While emphasizing each syllable as you clap, “Ba-by has two syllables.)</li> <li>• Segmenting and blending onsets and rimes (e.g., /c/ /at/</li> <li>• Identifying beginning, final, and medial phonemes in spoken words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentionally use visual models, gestures and manipulatives to model lessons</li> <li>• Involve ELLs in peer and cooperative learning</li> <li>• Provide additional work on English phonemes that are not present in the students' home language.</li> <li>• Provide one-on-one support when possible</li> </ul>
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	letter P. They all begin with the /p/ sound.).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Segmenting and blending individual phonemes in spoken words.</li> </ul>	
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### Phonics and Word Recognition

Research has shown that phonics and word study are valuable strategies for improving children’s ability to recognize words and decode text (Ehri, 2005). The goals of phonics and word study instruction are to teach children that there are systematic relationships between letters and sounds, that written words are composed of letter patterns representing the sounds of spoken words, that recognizing words quickly and accurately is a way of obtaining meaning from them, and that they can blend sounds to read words and segment words into sounds to spell (NICHD, 2000). Knowing the relationships will help children recognize familiar words automatically and decode or sound out new words (Armbruster et al., 2003).

Word recognition is the ability of a reader to recognize written words correctly and virtually effortlessly. Emergent readers need to learn to recognize high-frequency words instantly because many of them are not phonically regular. Children must learn to identify words quickly and fluently so that they can focus on the meaning of what they are reading (Stanovich, 1986).

Words that beginning readers initially sound out through word analysis or phonics come to be recognized as whole units after readers encounter them repeatedly in connected text. Effective phonics and word recognition instruction builds steadily on children’s understanding and use of both spoken and written language.

### 3. Phonics and Word Recognition (RF.PK.3)

Demonstrate emergent phonics and word analysis skills:

- With prompting and support, demonstrate one-to-one letter-sound correspondence by producing the primary sound of some consonants.
- Recognizes own name and common signs and labels in the environment.

Table 3: Supporting phonics and word recognition in preschool

Classroom/Home Environment	Adult/Teacher Directed	Instructional Examples	Support for ELL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify meaningful set of sound-letter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explicitly teach common sound-letter relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Class books that children create and can</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systematic instruction and additional time for</li> </ul>



<p>relationships (i.e., the first letter in children’s names)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Label personal items with children’s names</li> <li>• Word wall</li> <li>• Appropriate technology (e.g., computer software, iPad, interactive whiteboards) that support phonics and word recognition instruction</li> </ul>	<p>that are meaningful to children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposely use games to support sound-letter connections (e.g., tongue twisters)</li> </ul>	<p>frequently interact with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental print</li> <li>• Name cards</li> </ul>	<p>phonics instruction should be built into reading programs for ELLs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use wait time to allow children enough time to process questions</li> <li>• Use and encourage the use of think-aloud strategies to analyze and solve problems</li> </ul>
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## Fluency

Reading fluency is related to oral language proficiency (Rasinski, 2003). Children should be encouraged to use oral language for a variety of purposes, such as answering and asking questions as well as expressing their thoughts. In developing oral language skills, preschool children demonstrate a wide range of fluency. Oral language provides a foundation where children learn about the alphabetic principle and subsequently learn about the structure of spoken English words. Oral language development is a term used to describe the development of knowledge and skills that allow children to understand, speak, and use words to communicate. During the preschool years, children become fluent in the language spoken at home. With appropriate guidance and support, children’s oral language will develop as they begin to use more complex grammar and vocabulary. Children’s oral language skills serve as the foundation for both aspects of reading ability: Word reading and language comprehension (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013). Oral reading is also a well-documented method of increasing reading fluency in children (NICHD, 2000).

Oral language development provides students with the foundation for comprehending text and communicating effectively. Fluency is inextricably tied to decoding and reading comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). It serves as the bridge between decoding and comprehension.

**4. Fluency (RF.PK.3)**

Displays emergent reading behaviors with purpose and understanding (e.g., pretend reading).

Table 4: Supporting fluency in preschool

Classroom/Home Environment	Adult/Teacher Directed	Instruction Examples	Support for ELL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-reading familiar books</li> <li>• Model fluent reading</li> <li>• Echo reading</li> <li>• Appropriate technology (e.g., computer software, iPad, interactive whiteboards, voice recorders) that support receptive and expressive fluency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Songs, finger plays, poetry and nursery rhymes can be used to practice fluency</li> <li>• Books on tape, CD or DVD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model fluent reading by reading aloud daily.</li> <li>• Use expression while reading</li> <li>• Read a phrase or sentence aloud then have children repeat the same phrase or sentence</li> <li>• Act out books and stories to provide additional opportunities to translate written language to oral language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ELLs should participate in interactive read alouds</li> <li>• Use wait time to allow children enough time to process questions</li> <li>• Listen repeatedly to books read aloud in order to gain fluency in English</li> <li>• Identify new vocabulary to pre-teach before lesson or activity</li> </ul>

The New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core will provide an essential beginning for developing and implementing high quality curriculum, creating meaningful and appropriate learning experiences for four- year-olds across New York State, and informing other critical processes such as designing learning environments, planning standards based instruction and assessment, as well as pre-service and in-service training for administrators and teachers, and results-oriented parent engagement (NYSED, 2011 p.6).

**Assessment**

Foundational skill instruction must include assessment opportunities that measure progress in the Common Core Foundational Skills. Young children enter kindergarten from diverse backgrounds with a variety of skills that it is necessary to develop instruction to their individual strengths and needs. Assessment is used to measure development and learning, to guide teacher and program planning and decision-making,



and to report to and communicate with others (McAfee, et.al., 2004). Assessment of early literacy skills is important for identifying children who may need more intensive instruction to achieve success with literacy and become proficient readers.

The method of authentic evaluation and assessment, which includes observations of children, structured interviews, and portfolios, is used to monitor the growth and learning of individual children. A portfolio, with student work samples and other evidence from multiple sources (e.g., observations, anecdotal notes, parents) that reflect real-world activities, documents a child's efforts, interests, progress, and achievement in language and literacy. Authentic evaluation and assessment is vital for curriculum planning because it supports the creation of appropriate instructional strategies and activities to support children's development. Data from multiple sources (i.e., standardized assessments, observations, portfolios) provide valuable information for planning whole group, differentiated and individualized instruction.

#### English Language Learners

Oral language and literacy development is supported by children's home language. Children whose home language differs from the language of instruction will need additional support to build their oral language skills. Research indicates that English Language Learners (ELLs) acquire literacy skills in English faster and do better in school if they have a strong foundation in their home language (Espinosa, 2008). Foundational literacy skills developed in one language often transfer to a second language (Cardenas-Hagan et al., 2007). With appropriate instruction, preschool children can develop many of the foundational skills they will need for learning to read, and children in dual language programs are no exception. As children continue to develop language and literacy skills in their home language, those skills provide a scaffold for developing those same skills in their second language. During the early years, ELL's development occurs through meaningful interactions with others such as instructional conversations and collaboration with peers.

In order to face the challenges that come with a diverse classroom, all educators and administrators need to have both pre- and in-service training opportunities in linguistic and cultural diversity, and in principles of first and second language acquisition. It is also critical for the early childhood educator to understand the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their children in order to facilitate learning and build cross-cultural understandings with their families.

### Conclusion

A lack of foundation skills is a major cause of poor performance in struggling readers (Zorfass & Urbano, 2008). Struggling readers can include students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and others with diverse reading needs who are at risk for failure. Children who enter middle school without strong foundation skills will have difficulty in content areas that require reading, such as English language arts, social studies, science, and math (Zorfass & Urbano, 2008).

For all students, a high-quality early education is critical to ensuring their long-term academic success. Early learners need to understand why people read and write in order to be motivated to excel in their own literacy development. Through active engagement in the reading process, children learn ways to use their growing knowledge and skills flexibly and in combination with all domains of development. All children can



develop a strong foundation for literacy and reading development when they are given opportunities to engage in purposeful, meaningful language and early print activities.

Reading is a process that builds upon a wide range of developing skills and is an ongoing process. Every child will move through each of the stages of reading development at their own pace. The foundations of good reading are the same for all children, regardless of their gender, background, or special learning needs. Most children use the same processes in learning to read. Some will need more support than others and may need more instruction in one reading skill than another. Children who have an opportunity to develop basic foundational skills in language and literacy in preschool enter kindergarten ready to learn to read and write (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008). With foundational skills in place, students will develop and flourish as readers on the K-12 pathway.

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